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The Last Resort Inn Incident

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Two winters ago: Glarrys, our faithful Tabaxi, had made her inheritance. From waitress to the owner of the inn. Her inn, the tradepost, and a militia chapter of the rangers made up the entire, little outpost. Cozy, now that most monsters had been neutralized. Beloved, and lucrative, as good-aligned ex-adventurers deserve it.

Last year's greatest drama was a cooking festival hosted by gnomes going awry & an unexpected lack of supplies. Luckily, the halfling rangers were so loyal, that they skipped their third breakfast for the entire winter, and added only one late-night meal to the regular five meals per day. ``Gluttony, a goddess ?´´

This year, I knew: It was different, because Glarrys contacted me, using clerical magic. Such is not easily done for fun, so an emergency must have occurred! Aged, but not callous, I prepared to aid my former comrade in arms. Starting, by alerting other former members of our adventuring team.

Me? Yes, indeed, I had forgotten my manners once again, as if reading my aura and looking at my quite formidable arcane robe and staff would not already do that for me.

I am Lucario ``Oakstaff´´ Pretzlau. An aging, human small-town-wizard with a handful of graduations in arcane circles and seminars.

While I would never consider myself a master wizard, I did spend twenty-five years of my life as an adventuring aka wandering wizard.

``And another 25 years trying to recover & survive a while longer!´´

Tragically undone, when we clashed with a creature not even supposed to still exist. A Larakhen spawn. Swamp creatures continuously devouring the magic out of any life-form known. If one does not flee.

Blessed survivor of the assault, as I was neither alone nor an ill-prepared bookworm type of person. Tactical withdrawal. Years of wandering had kept my muscles in mediocre shape. Not, that I could compete with a ranger, a monk, or fighters, but I had learned from each of them. Still, my power was wrecked, drained.

Where was I? Ah, I am Lucario ``Oakstaff´´ Pretzlau, and for a swift journey across the realm, I contacted former companions, so not to travel alone. It has always proven wise to stay wary of criminals, and even wiser to never travel ill-prepared! And, while I could no longer just teleport us across the realm...

I still knew solitary wizards, some rare warlocks, and colleges and academies worth asking for help. Hence, I gathered two more adventurers, who owed Glarrys the kind of favor that makes aging wrecks once more risk clashing with dangerous Evil. Bards earn more with such tales, I know.

I felt relieved, when Gurin Shadowstomper, a dwarven thief unbelievably fond of his family belonging to a dwarven house that went from underground to living in the forest, willingly joined in. Rogues are a vigilant sort, and a Hill Dwarf companion is a good safeguard against the criminal foul play, non-magic-users tend to muster!

Our third companion was a surprise, as Melissa ``Paladina´´ of the Sacred Shield (an order of knightly wardens), started her wandering year. This means she had earned the privilege of leaving the cloistered walls of the order by graduation and dutiful service for at least one year. A real, knighted paladin woman.

Rain-resistant traveler clothing for me, armors and shields for Melissa, and the leather on mithril only a dwarf, like Gurin, could consider body armor. Food rations, water flasks, and filters, so we could drink river water without falling sick. The little yet wise efforts learned on a hundred ordeals before.

With a travel preparation and group gathering done within only eight hours, I was decently happy. If it would not have been under the pressure of time, then a full group of at least six adventurers would have been formed, but I was glad that payment was not part of this.

We three boarded a small ship, sailed west one harbor in distance, and then failed to find horses, so I did an incantation of swift movement on each of our boots and shoes. Moving faster than most rangers could, we made our way to the inn named the Last Resort.

Glarrys' new homestead.

Some beast howled in the night, but the overall assessment of danger was wonderfully absent. After a short sleep in the forest, we used the early morning light to reach our destination. Awestruck, as the outpost had been worked into a walled little village by now.

Craftsmen work done during the last year. Impressive!

Age and pain take some toll on my ability to concentrate, so the stars I saw, when entering the inn resulted in a slightly less well-trained Glarrys hugging me nearly senseless are mentioned. A bit tired, but still the Tabaxi woman I remembered. Life was hard for her, but it was work she did for herself now.

Glarrys still wore her holy symbol, was clad in a chainmail shirt (tank-top style, yet mithril metal), and had studded leather bracers protecting arms and legs. Not half the real cleric armor, still far from being naive about the new job excluding what we had faced so often before.

An intense hour cut short, as we had mostly personal issues to debate: Glarrys had sensed a change in the inn's atmosphere. She had checked it with her magical senses, and found something odd, vaguely toxic opposing her investigation. Soon thereafter, nightmares haunted, whoever slept in the inn.

The emanations of evil, depravity or the presence of undead in the vicinity CAN trigger such nightmares. Nightmares, which are a burden to some, but also a warning sign to watch out for, as they are grossly different from childhood bad dreams!

Gurin inquired about dwarven ale, but I was happy to realize, after just a moment of eavesdropping, that Gurin meant to deliver dwarven ale to the Last Resort. Yes, dwarves are good in business, and dwarven ale was even legal. Always a pleasure, when the thief is disciplined and cautious enough. Kinda.

Melissa followed her routine procedure, as trained paladins would not even freak out about evil detected. She assessed the rooms, and the frequenters of the inn, with her divine scrutiny, but did not mention any concern to either me or to Gurin or Glarrys.

In my experience, people of the faith are stronger, when not alone. Could be wishful thinking or an older man's nostalgia, yet I think: Glarrys and Melissa seemed to get along well. No heated debates about different deities, and the kind of gentle but formal: I knew from so many women in the past. Good enough.

We made a quick plan, as we were impaired by the routine having to go on. So far, no danger would justify evacuating the inn. We ate in the kitchen, and once the guests were served, we ventured upstairs, to use magical detection, physical tracking, and whatever dwarven villainy offered.

After four incantations, I felt a minor headache arising, and the first signs of fatigue made it harder for me to concentrate. Still, I finished all six of my prepared magical detection routines, as I wanted to do my part in making sure our rooms would be safe, and the trouble zone would be thoroughly investigated.

There was a baleful, clearly magical presence, but not the form a person, like a typical Tiefling sorcerer, or a spell or ritual would leave behind. No surprise, as the occurrence covered an area, at minimum one floor of the inn, and thereby threatened the entire outpost.

I helped buy us time to rest, as I used my magic to counter the magic we had detected. Weakening it temporarily would not solve the problem, but it allowed us a safer rest to be in shape for undoing it best we could. Gurin mumbled about a bad feeling, too.

Bad news to us. Sense of foreboding.

``They will tell you that arcane formulae is trusted and established for a reason. True, still I tell you: Not one of those bookworms has survived a single assault by real monsters and real villains! Hence, there is a smarter way called adapting your staff enchantments to your way of life, not some ancient tome's boasting.´´

While it was not my first night in clothing, keeping my staff in my hands, I still wondered, how much harder such must be, when wearing metal armor, a shield, and larger weapons of the martial sorts. Gurin and Melissa, much like Glarrys, never really complained about it. Still, sometimes it showed to impair movement nonetheless.

There are magical effects, be they arcane or divine in their origins, which immediately make living folks aware of them. One such occurred after midnight, and in retrospect, I know that not only I was instant-awake, when it happened.

The upper floor of the Last Resort had six guestrooms. While not spartan, like monk cells, each was at best made for two persons. By design, all rooms had vaguely the same structure and interior. Typical, little hotel rooms, one could say in big city words. But, something was wrong. Very wrong.

Glarrys was already rushing up the stairs, as faithfully unafraid, she had continued to work and sleep in her room below. Gurin and Melissa were on the corridor, weapons in their hands. One look and we reassured each other that we had the same bad feeling.

The three guests supposedly there with us did not answer, when we knocked on their doors. After Glarrys used the master key and Gurin opened another door to save us time, we found them gone. Gone, as in vanished, abducted, snatched away, for the windows showed no sign of acrobatic escape, nor sleep wandering.

``That magic is still tucking at me. Can you feel it, too?´´, I asked.

Agreement from all three swiftly followed, and due to Gurin I could be sure it was NOT just the awareness trained spellcasters share when strange magic is around. The magic was made to tuck, for whatever purpose.

Dream-like shifts in our perceptions occurred. Or, better said: What we mistook to be dreamy were in fact emanations of someone attempting to meddle with the reality of our surroundings. Instead of waiting dumbstruck, I shielded my team with the kinda spells we wizards use to absorb magic missiles.

What happened next is hard to describe, as we were simply ripped away from where we stood. Ripped away forcefully, by an unknown magic now specifically targeting us four. We awoke in a cavern.

A feeling of dread with us, but not immediately urgent. Chants could be heard, syllables of incantations!

Contemplating every bit of wizardry I could remember, I concluded that those spellcasters I name cultists had directed the baleful energy to prevent us from ending it. With lives at stake that was malevolent enough to consider militant resistance. The risk of harm by trying to knock them unconscious only seemed too great. It was, as later learned.

Our five opponents fought, albeit disturbed during their ritual, and we won only by the clerical magic healing the wounds we suffered.

Gurin, as swift as his blend of rapier and dwarven warhammer went, was still too slow to reach a second opponent after finishing his first one off.

I see no heroism in it, but justified protection of the community. We killed five cultists, who probably were homicidal maniacs, and who DID use black magic against each of us and others. Sadly, only bardic tales end with a celebration.

Cultists often serve a more formidable power, called a higher power, albeit the lower hells are the most common source.

Once we had ended the ritual, we were no longer targets, but that was it. That alone did not end the threat. Hence, we continued our investigation.

As noted, after Melissa and Glarrys had prayed for healing, which is a lifesaver we thank the gods for! Using magical senses, we found the hell-hole, call it portal, that delivered the weird energy. And, being too wise to consider me, or our team, greater heroic powers, we kept it simple.

Melissa and Glarrys coordinated their prayers with my incantations. The clerical magic aiming to turn anything contaminated by Evil back into natural (at best into sacred), and my ability to undo magical effects, focused on weakening the baleful portal's resistance.

The final struggle, and at least we scored a temporal success. Mightier wizards may indeed curse my name. But, my task was to support Glarrys. And, reporting to the local constabulary and alerting temples and arcane colleges would still be done in the weeks to follow. That struggle never ends, and being limited does not imply that we did not act dutiful and sane.

The cult must be found, as knowledge of using such magics is certainly not in books for starter students. The energy must be identified, so to go proper threat assessment.

Finally, the influence of evil outsiders must be thwarted, as the mere thought is worse than nightmares! Literally.

And, as written by me: We sat in bathtubs, shaking and hurting. Our greatest longing was being alone and comfy in our beds! Rest & recovery. No sex orgy to celebrate that we were still alive. No gold dished and no cheering commoners, nor any promotions on the job.

We just did the right thing, the best we could.

THE END

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Bonus Content:

Harsh Words And Fiercer Deeds: The Shadow's Kiss

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Optional: The readers may imagine themselves as an agent of the bardic guild. An inquirer listening to the words of the only known survivor of this tale. It is a neutral role, with only a classic, or pathetic, cliché little author-BS in the final. ;-)

The tale, as written & told:

During a comparably mild winter night in the Unforgotten Realms, a couple of rogues are on their way to unmask a fraudulent sorcerer and, well, kill the old man.

I named them Andy and Cathy, as I write this after having to handle real-world political issues. ;-)

So, fantasy a la Dungeons & Dragons, realms full of heroes & heroines, flamboyant villains, and fierce monsters. Starter players never seem to realize that those `shadows, reflecting us´ are a pearl of wisdom.

Born, in realizing how the world around us AND the people around us always affect, who we are and how much of it we can embody.

Embody, for a while, until Death gets us, or until the deities aka gods of the realms make us some pseudo-immortal creature.

Whoa, how comes, the black sheep of the Pretzlau family tells the tale? Straight, while also being the wicked sorcerer IN that tale?

`Your brother became a real wizard, why did you not even try?´, recites Daron Pretzlau.

The bald, hairy, and fat `wicked sorcerer´ even ignites a cigar, puffing the addictive smoke in utter mockery of the new age!

`I celebrate my survival my way, feel free, to do it your way instead.´, babbles the smoker.

`Last night, I indeed got surprised by my surprise visitors, as home invaders sound so an overstatement. After all, they were merely veteran criminals with the cantrips of sorcery or wizardry one could expect.´, says Daron. (Story mode now, no more dialogue unpaid extra efforts)

So, let me summarize, what must have been a thrilling tale of nocturnal venturing when seen from the criminals' perspective. Both of them were, after all, renowned cutthroats associated with several underworld contacts. Andy and Cathy had become partners in crime, who rose from date theft and robbery to the more lucrative `criminal for hire´ jobs.

Andy, a quite attractive youngster ready for the world, and Cathy, a former prostitute avenging herself on society.

Given, that for more than three years the rumor mills of the city, Weidelbach, unleashed tons of suggestions, implications, and accusations about the vile Daron Pretzlau. The specter forming there was born in the unspoken hope that somebody else would kill the downtrodden fatling, as the original accuser, obviously, wasn't capable enough to simply drop me dead. Contrary to other rumors, it is possible, as I am neither a vampire, nor any form of shadow creature immune to physical weapons, diseases, and accidents alike.

No, I may have my expertise in the occult and the arcane, but I was born a human and that means aging is a fierce tribute. A tribute, I am certain, my dear brother Lucario will always handle better than I am accredited for and his words will also always be wiser than whatever survival of unspoken ordeals made me ever warn anyone, and the both of us will be meaningless fools, when our younger sisters decide to dominate whatever topic it is.

In our family, such is quite a tradition. Might makes right, as we failed to undo the competition among siblings and have to live with the unappreciated result.

So must the others, but at least the Pretzlau family is a real family, does have an occult heritage, and some lesser noble titles to inherit around. What a wonderful chance to make the materialists and the greedy prove themselves puppets on just another string. I am not judging on it, as neither crime nor sorcery made me off any better than the rest of the family.

So, back to our couple of home invaders. Killing for the jollies, then milking the result for all it is worth. Looting my corpse and lying to the public about how such selfish greed was in truth altruist service to society and the greater good.

Oh, how their sexy, young bodies must have stealthily undone my security measures, and indeed, knowledge of arcane traps does speak of more than gutter scum, if I am asked about it.

The two gorgeous ones outwitted the city guard and approached my private residence without even triggering a single alarm (detonating skulls & death ray shooting symbols tend to be among the basic wizardry precautions shared by sorcerers and warlocks).

`In the end, their mix of skill and good timing was indeed their undoing!´ (punchline written in hope of making the story more compelling, cheap trick)

The two walking orgasms, Andy & Cathy, eye candy even to the blind, infiltrated the residence, found their way through it, and confronted me. Me, Daron Pretzlau, the wicked dark sorcerer scapegoat of the tale. Well, blame dumpster, as the scapegoat is a notch misdirecting.

Andy was merely too smart and too well-prepared for me, the dark sorcerer. And, not even his recurrent habit of trying hard to impress Cathy aka showing off did sabotage that.

The two rogues, standing in my ritual chamber that moment, were dangerous and I was fully aware of that. It was also easy to guess they had murder in their eyes anyway.

My every word of warning was called a threat. A denial, I had met very often. Found, in people, who have either their crime or their twisted mindset to protect from the truth.

Daron: `Beware, those whispers are merely the beginning!´

Andy: `Cheap trick, wizard! Cathy, those are only a magic cantrip, they ebb off if you won't panic.´

To be factual, the whispers of that spell aka incantation REALLY do ebb off, when one keeps steady nerves and courage instead of panicking. Sorry, an obligation to the basic foundations of sorcery & wizardry.

Andy: `Yeah, of course. And that darkness looming won't be undone by my little light spell, old man?´

Daron: `No, it will only get more hostile unto the Lightbringer, most unwelcome guests.´

Andy already unleashed a bright, glowing globe of pure white light. A temporal brightness clashed with the darkness, and I was afraid, as in a frenzy I could be torn to shreds centuries before the term `collateral damage´ will even be invented.

The atmosphere in my ritual chamber, both, returned to the dark normalcy and had a different aspect to it. Until my senses fooled me, or stress took a toll. Still, an undercurrent of malevolence, hostility, or bloodlust now seemed part of it.

With only an old man in the room, the two sexy rogues did not find their match, they made it come true.

Let me help the listener by explaining that I indeed was surprised early on, and that I also indeed had to reserve my chosen few combat spells for the right moment, as rogues are fast-moving types, who tend to be quicker than old sorcerers. Contemplating, I think that it was the youthful energy of the two that made it seem so abstract to me.

They came, to kill me and boast about it among their kind. They rushed in when I would have considered the mere act of doing so unwise & unhealthy, and they persisted, until Andy mistook certain insights to be my spell casting.

The shadows did not have to come, as they were already there to meditate along with me. This simplification may also mean that I had to protect myself from cold, energy drains, and other effects of being on friendlier terms with denizens of dimensions not meant to mortal mankind at all.

Last, when wizards, sorcerers, and warlocks are topics, then nearly anybody would expect a ritual chamber to have certain symbols painted on the floor. So had my room, true. Just, that those were neither protective wards nor summoning aids at all. I was never that powerful and I could only shield myself and perhaps a person close & loyal enough.

The signs on the floor were luminescent to help me make my way, and the symbols were personal reminders of what spells to NOT forget during emergencies caused by creatures & influences from outside physical reality as mankind knows it.

The two rogues fought fiercely and even attempted a swift withdrawal when it became clear to them that victory would not be theirs.

Call it evil, call it sexist, when the less humanoid shadows manifested tendrils to rape Cathy, I may have had an erection. Albeit one not reaching my mind, as such violent crimes are zero pleasure to me, and I did not even want to watch what conspired.

It took some time, but the dark ones, the real agents & harbingers of darkness to which even the most powerful wizards & sorcerers are merely talented lackeys, had their way in my ritual chamber. See, rumors aside, I am what is called a Rogue Shadowcaster, not a real Sorcerer (or wizard). So, while

I know some occult teachings & arcane formulae on darkness, shadows, and necromancy it was simply not a ritual chamber for those kinda works.

My ritual chamber, while including spontaneous spellcasting and channeling of energies some may call unholy, was more meant for meditation and discourse with my partners in crime, my friends, allies, and associates. And that is, what got Andy and Cathy killed.

Even I expected to be alone in my room that night, but among the spells Andy unleashed, some merely recited from scrolls, some shot from a wand, one of those spells must have really been a beacon drawing attention. And, might makes right, the fact that the dark ones allowed me to survive and not end like Cathy either also means that I owe them the same consideration and some discretion.

`So, if on your way back to the bards' college you begin to hear whispers and start seeing moving shadows: Run to holy ground, stay in brightly lit areas, speak your prayers, or cast your protective spells best you can.

In this case, just like in this tale, I am simply not the real protagonist, just another puppet on a different string!´

THE END

The first story, The Last Resort Inn Incident, has a narration done by Adam Cabrera aka Capricious Cabrera on Youtube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8f2Xwr8la_g